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Relational Aggression and Burnout: Fight, Hide, or Run?

Mary K. Culver

This study looks at female relational aggression in an effort to illustrate factors involved in selecting appropriate responses for the situation. This ethnographic case study analyzes a principal's interview, personal journal, and artifact file to describe the situations and reactions present in a severe case of female relational aggression. Qualitative analysis refined data into three categories of responses to relational aggression: (1) fighting or struggling to resolve issues, (2) hiding or avoiding negative situations, and (3) running or leaving the situation. Elements that pushed the case study toward career burnout are explored, as are elements that may have prevented burnout.

Purpose of the Study

Nothing has more potential to subdue women's role in leadership than the oft misunderstood relations among women themselves. Indeed, it is not the artificial barrier of the "glass ceiling" that prevents and discourages women leaders as much as the particular expression of gender-bound aggression within the ranks of women. Understanding the complex and fluctuating roles played by women, especially in leadership capacities, helps us to analyze particular situations and determine how to measure our response to each, maintain our personal renewal, and avoid disharmony and burnout.

Statement of the Problem

This case study is designed to determine which elements involved in an episode of female relational aggression fuel career burnout.

Significance of the Study

By holding a deeper understanding of the roles played in relational aggression and our reaction to each, we are better prepared to overcome primal fears, and support, rather than hinder, female successes. We can avoid our own tendencies to "bully," prevent aggression against others, and reduce our negative reactions to female aggression. The impact of relational aggression on the emotional health of the victim can be measured against

About the Author

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known causes of burnout, for improved support for those in similar situations. This significance is limited by the size of the sample, in this case, a single case study; therefore, it is important for readers to interpret for themselves the transferability of this study's finding to any other situation, based on the fit between the cases.

Review of the Literature

Dellasega, author of *Mean Girls Grown Up* (2005), describes the concept of female relational aggression as the emotional counterpart to the physical aggression more commonly displayed in males. This aggression is particularly important in establishing dominance and pack "hierarchy" (Dellasega, 2005, p. 31). Women who have not overcome the personal fears and feelings of inadequacy inherent in adolescence continue the roles of "Queen Bee," "Middle Bees" (supporters of the "Queen"), and the "Victim." Dellasega describes the Queen Bee as a woman who has "learned to be constantly on the offense in her interactions with peers, launching preemptive strikes that she believes will protect . . . her interests." The Middle Bee "may have learned to be subtle in the messages she gives others, or she may secretly straddle the fence between aggression and passivity." She describes the Victim as a woman who "desperately wants to make connections that will empower and help rather than hurt her, but lacks the confidence or skill to do so." Rhode (2003) also uses the term "Queen Bee" to describe women who do not value a helpful relationship among women (pp. 13–14). This metaphor of "bees" may stem from the highly structured, interactive community inherent within a hive, while the term "queen" may be derived from interactions between women of history.

In quoting Shakespeare's *Mary, Queen of Scots*, Briles (1987) compares the treachery of Elizabeth toward Mary to dysfunctional relationships carried on by some women today. "Some women are still spreading scandals, and dealing in half truths. Others are still the naïve, incredulous victims of more envious 'sisters'" (p. xiii). Despite the fight or flight reflex so inherent in humanity, Taylor (2002) counters that the more common stress reac-

tion in women is to tend to, and befriend, each other. "The care giving we provide to others is as fundamental to human nature as our selfishness or aggression" (p. 3). Just as primates use gestures, such as grooming, to build social bonds, communication develops the bonds between humans. When relational aggression is allowed to undermine healthy relationships, this "social glue" can become toxic. Briles concludes "even though there are victims and perpetrators, both types of women are at risk. And to a very great extent, both are the victims of the rivalry between them" (1987, p. xiii). A win-win outcome is unlikely, although a win-lose, or lose-lose scenario is quite possible.

Aggression in the workplace is predominately emotional and psychological, rather than physical (Keashly, 2001). When the position of power is achieved through the means of relational aggression, the resulting leadership style is likely to be dissonant. Cortina, Magley, and Williams (2001) found that up to one third of an organization's most powerful individuals initiated "uncivil acts" against members of both genders, although females experience these acts more frequently. A leader who "habitually misuses power, singlemindedly pursuing personal goals or ineffectively managing their own . . . are direct creators of dissonance, and the people around them suffer. People who report to these leaders and have to interact with them daily or weekly become victims of chronic stress" (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005, p. 53). Even if the leader of the organization is not actively participating in aggressive behavior, their lack of action against it (*laissez-faire* leadership) is positively correlated with role conflict, role ambiguity, and conflicts with coworkers, or "bullying" in the workplace (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, and Hetland, 2007). Cortina and Magley (2003) noted that victims in workplace aggression suffer health issues when they endure mistreatment without voicing resistance, yet if they do resist, they face various forms of retaliation, based on the social position of the victim and the aggressor.

Career burnout, defined by Pinés and Aronson (1988) is "a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long term involvement in situations that are emotionally demanding" (p. 9). Furthermore, they find that the most stressful aspects of a job are those which prevent the individual from achieving significant and meaningful work (p. 52). Swick (1989) defines stress as "a person's affective reaction to a specific situation or series of related events." Long term and pervasive stress is more likely to lead to burnout than instances of acute stress. He cites a "lack of personal efficacy" as the largest single cause of stress (p. 7) and adds a poor psychological climate, ineffective leadership, and lack of administrative support as other frequently mentioned stressors. The decision to remain in a dissatisfying position or to seek alternative jobs is related to the need of security over efficacy (Yee, 1990). Those who view their job as a means to security can "burnout" any spark of enthusiasm they may have held for a position and quietly endure their job dissatisfaction. However, those who seek existential goals through their work are more likely to leave jobs with

inadequate administrative and collegial support in their search for efficacy (pp. 112–115).

In her doctoral dissertation, Garden (1985) found a link between Jungian personality types and causes of burnout, noting that Thinking types burned out on intellectual tasks, while Feeling types burned out on emotional demands. Sakai, Akiyama, Miyake, Kawamura, Tsuda, and Kuraboyashi (2005) concur that temperament has a significant impact on perceptions of job stress, more than age, gender, or job rank. Further, they conclude that “temperament influences interpersonal relationship stressors more than workload-related stressors” (p. 101). This is supported by the findings of Mayes, Johnson, and Sandi (2000), who note that “both work situation and personality seem to be important variables in the choice of coping behaviors.” Insight into personality temperaments may prove useful in predicting who may be most at risk of suffering burnout from prolonged relational aggression.

In understanding the roles of female relational aggression, we have insight into the often unspoken dark side of women in any level of leadership. Focusing further on the destructive stress induced by dissonant leaders, it becomes evident that women in leadership can become “enemies” as readily as “allies”. Understanding the motivations and personality types of relational aggression victims may help us to identify the elements which bolster the spirit, prevent burnout, and discover situation-appropriate coping skills.

Research Design

This ethnographic case study was developed from nine months of interaction with a principal in a rapidly growing school district. Three sources of data were investigated, including a structured interview, review of a personal journal, and review of artifacts (meeting notes, calendar items, memos and e-mails). After collection, the data were analyzed to develop a descriptive narrative surrounding instances of relational aggression and the “victim’s” reaction to these instances. Qualitative analysis methods were used to refine the resulting data, which was then categorized into appropriate analyst-constructed typologies to describe the elements of relational aggression instances that contributed to the decisions to struggle to improve, ignore, or remove herself from the situation. These classified elements are then examined to identify those which caused symptoms of burnout.

Data Collection

The case study principal was interviewed face-to-face. An exact transcript of the interview was scripted by the researcher. A personal journal and file of artifacts were submitted for researcher’s review. The researcher took notes on these documents and returned them to the principal.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was completed on all gathered data, including interview script, personal journal entries, and artifact file. Data analysis procedures searched for rival explanations of patterns discovered among the data sources. "Negative" case examples found in the assembled data helped to clarify the "limits and meanings of the pattern" (Patton, 1987). This process, and the examination of any possible rival explanations for patterns in the data, increased the validity of the interview protocol and research design.

Gathered data were examined for patterns indicating the principal's reaction to various external stimuli, including behaviors of individuals on both sides of the chain of command. Open-ended interview data, personal journal data, and artifact data are reported in the summary narrative method, and by using a summary table. Qualitative differences among the principal's reactions are presented in a matrix.

After all data were collected and transcribed, a first reading was made for notation and organization around the research question. A case study review was written based on the experiences and opinions of the principal interviewed, and examined for developing patterns of behavior. This case study was then edited to build a narrative that described, analyzed, interpreted, and evaluated the data. Comparisons among the three data sources were made to identify similarities and differences in the emerging patterns. This record was analyzed for examples and patterns that were significant to the research question, and organized into corresponding classifications. An inductive analysis resulting in appropriate analyst-constructed typologies was made after careful examination of these data. These typologies, which coalesce the attributes of emergent patterns, were approved by the case study principal to assure authenticity of the classification. Finally, a cross-classification of the typology categories produced a logical analysis of the data, resulting in a matrix of principal reactions latticing situational factors (Patton, 1987).

Presentation of the Data

In the attempt to determine which elements involved in an intense episode of female relational aggression fuel career burnout, the following analysis of data gathered from an interview, personal journal, and artifact file is presented in narrative, tabulated, and matrix form.

Interview Data

The interview with the case study principal began with a brief history of her position at Desert High School. The case study principal is a divorced Caucasian female in her forties. Prior to accepting this position, she had experience as a principal in a small school district and as an assistant principal in a large school district. She has a strong background in curriculum and in-

struction, and had recently completed a doctorate degree in leadership. She was the first female principal at this forty-year-old school. The school was under a complete reconstruction overhaul; space was limited and the campus was riddled with construction equipment and fences.

In addition to the principal being new to the district, the superintendent, and assistant superintendent were also new to the district. The superintendent hired the principal after an exhaustive interview process, and together, they participated in hiring the new assistant superintendent. One of the assistant principals in the school had been a long-standing teacher there, with strong ties to the teacher association leadership (she was still a member of the teachers' association). She had applied for the principal's position, with the backing of the association, and was "screened out" of the process. This assistant principal had a very close relationship with the principal of the other district high school.

Of the five board members of the district, two were replaced by election, and one resigned and was replaced by appointment of the county superintendent. The district was experiencing hyper-growth, and was working to pass a budget override. Just prior to the reconstruction project, much of the board resigned due to the decision to rebuild the campus in the original location, rather than moving the site to a more "safe" location.

Hints of female-to-female relational aggression began before the principal had a set of keys to the school. During the initiation walk-through of the campus, the outgoing assistant superintendent and principal mentioned that the other high school principal had a very competitive approach to most women, and that she was closely connected to the assistant principal who had been overlooked for the position. The very first relational aggression incident occurred with the other principal, on their first meeting. Throughout a staffing meeting with district human resources, the other principal completely shunned the new principal. "Although we sat next to each other, she never once looked at me, addressed me, or even referred to me by anything other than by my high school's name." On their next meeting, interviewing for the vacant assistant superintendent position, the other principal was very "chummy" with the new principal, and enthusiastically rallied for the selection of a candidate who was an "acquaintance" of hers, and of the assistant principal's. At their third encounter at the district administrative workshop, the new principal recalled a conversation regarding preparation and degree programs. When the other principal asked which institution she had graduated from, her response drew a dismissive sweep of the hand, accompanied by, "Oh, that university; that doesn't really count."

The web of relational aggression encompassing the new principal continued to be revealed as the first weeks and months of the appointment unfolded. Although other district personnel would check in with the principal when they were visiting the campus, at least three times the new assistant superintendent was encountered having a private conference with the assistant principal on campus. Each time the principal accidentally walked in on the tête-à-tête, the assistant superintendent offered the excuse that she was

just on her way to see the principal, yet never with any substantial purpose once they were together. The “exclusion” of the principal by her direct supervisor and her direct subordinate continued to grow in frequency and intensity. The two would have long, private lunches during administrative workshops, and made a very public appearance together after one such outing. The principal indicated that this sent a clear message to other administrators that she was in the “out” group.

Prior to the hire of the new principal, the assistant principal had garnered the support of the teachers’ association president and vice president, both teachers at Desert High School. After working with her assistant principal for several months, believing they were on the same “instructionally-driven” wave length, the principal received a disturbing anonymous letter, signed simply “the teachers at Desert.” The principal recalled that the letter warned her that the assistant principal was complaining of the principal’s leadership, and the effect was “splitting the faculty in two.” She spoke to the superintendent about the letter, and he assured her that insubordination would not be allowed. He then, however, called in the assistant superintendent and turned the matter over to her. This resulted in a meeting between the principal, assistant superintendent, and the assistant principal, in which the matter was denied and swept under the rug.

Eventually, the assistant superintendent requested to reassign the assistant principal. The principal agreed on the condition that the assistant principal would complete her obligation of supervising the state testing for the school before she left. This was agreed to all around. Follow up on both individuals by the principal indicated, up to the day before the test, that the agreement would be carried through. On the day of the test, the assistant principal left the school, leaving the testing program unsupervised. When the principal reacted to this breach of protocol by e-mailing the assistant superintendent, she was sharply criticized and the assistant principal was exonerated in her action. The principal stated that this was the moment that she recognized that all the relational aggression episodes she had thus experienced were related, and that the problem extended both above and below her on the organizational chart.

Further accounts by the principal indicate her belief that the assistant superintendent was deliberately excluding the principal, against the best interests of the school and the students. She recounts that she discovered at a weekly meeting with the construction team that the assistant superintendent had insisted on changing the design of the new classroom building, even after the foundation had been poured. The principal’s surprise at this news was compounded by her realization that this would directly impact the program of study that was associated with that building. She noted, with chagrin that the architect and foreman both noticed that she had been totally left out of the “loop” on that decision. It furthered the principal’s sense of futility that a department chair had been involved in the plan, and had been told by the assistant superintendent “not to tell” the principal.

The principal followed this incident up by requesting a meeting with the

assistant superintendent. This meeting was to take place in the principal's office (although the smallest of all offices, due to the construction issues on campus), and was to include the other high school principals of the district. Several minutes after the appointed time, the principal called the district office to confirm the meeting, as no one had arrived. The principal was informed that the assistant superintendent was running late. At that point, the principal left her office to confer with a counselor. On her way to that department, she encountered the other principals visiting in the hallway. Surprised, she greeted them with a "hello," was ignored, so she continued on her task. After meeting the counselor, the principal returned to where the other principals were still talking in the hall. Again, she greeted them, and told them that the assistant superintendent was running late. One "hissed" that she knew that, and turned back to her conversation. The principal returned to her office. When the assistant superintendent finally arrived, she called one of the visiting principals into the principal's office, where she proceeded to scold the principal for being rude and not welcoming the other principals to campus. The principal, at this point, realized the attack for what it was, and countered with the facts and no apology.

The principal recounted her feelings during this period of relational aggression.

"I felt myriad negative emotions in response to the relational aggression. Foremost was the rejection of those I wanted to be my peers. This led to depression, sadness, and anger that they labeled me 'outcast' without even giving me a chance. I'd cry in my car almost every morning before going into the office. I started to have sleeping problems. I couldn't take my mind off of what 'they' had done or worrying about what 'they'd' do next. I felt I was losing my identity at home; that I'd become inseparable from the chaos of work."

Regarding her ultimate decision to leave the school, the principal recalls,

"I feared for my job for awhile, but the increased level of paranoia had it well protected. I felt like a quitter, that I was letting down those who depended on me to make the place better. Then [I] decided against a lifetime of this kind of battle. I defined for myself what I wanted out of life. After I resigned, I focused on doing 'good' where I could, and living by my sense of justice."

It was clear that the principal was uncomfortable with the victim role, and struggled with her dedication to her professional duty and her resolve for personal efficacy. "I never did decide to embrace their game, and play people like pawns. . . . I like to think that refusing to lose my humanity and integrity helped me rise above their muck." This struggle both fueled, and prevented, burnout.

Table 1 condenses various situations described by the principal during her interview, as well as her corresponding reactions to each.

Table 1
Interview Data

Situation	Reaction
Ignored by other HS principal at 1st meeting	Hide - carried on as if no slight occurred
Assistant superintendent visiting with AP without checking in w/ principal	Hide - ignored slight and entered into conversation as if invited
Back-handed comments i.e. - "Your degree is from ____ University? That doesn't count."	Hide - ignored insults
Sabotage of state testing protocol	Fight - e-mailed assistant superintendent requesting correction of behavior
Lunch meeting to inform principal she "didn't have support" of faculty	Fight - took anonymous survey of leadership behaviors/ results opposite
Accused of "ignoring" other HS principal	Fight - countered with instances of greeting and individual's failure to announce herself
Investigated for misuse of funds	Fight - investigation fell flat before principal ever heard of it; objected to superintendent about "sneaky" manner in which it was conducted
Anonymous letter from teachers warning principal of AP's undermining	Fight - took issue to superintendent, who deferred to assistant superintendent
Change in program of study	Fight - School's lower SES background did not mean students would only benefit from vocational specialties
Change of new building construction to support change in program of studies	Hide - Change had been made; principal was the last to know.
Resignation	Run - refused to play the "win-lose" game

Journal Data

The principal made her personal journal available for review by the researcher during the interview. She explained that she had also kept a professional journal at work with a much higher frequency of entries, but had burned it after leaving the district as a "healing" gesture. Because of the depth of documentation found in her "artifacts" files, the researcher was more interested in the personal journal. By examining the entries that related to her experiences at work, it is possible to infer some degree of the affect work stress was having on her personal life. Work-related entries were

made roughly once every month. They ran the course from eager strategizing, through avoidance, to exit strategies, and resolve with several entries devoted to healing and personal renewal.

The journal accounts that indicate a manner of “fight” by the principal relate to building a positive community. Her earliest entry is made the day after her first contract day on the job, and indicates normal “new job” jitters and excitement. An undertone of uncertainty is evident even in this early stage, “[I] have nagging thoughts about my teams’ loyalty. . . . I wonder if they’re as nervous about me as I am [about] them; I will feel better after a 1-1 sit down with each of them.” It is important to note that the principal had been working “long-distance” with her assistant principal for over a month prior to this entry. This entry also indicated that the principal took the administrative team out to lunch at The Red Lobster.

The first journal entry indicating growing concern came about a month later. The principal reflects on a disturbing letter she received from her staff, questioning the assistant principal’s loyalty.

“I am concerned about the ‘Toni’ thing at work. . . . I got an anonymous letter, signed ‘The Teachers of Desert High’ warning me that ‘Toni’ had been complaining about my ‘policies’ to the staff, and it’s splitting the faculty in two. Alone, I would file this as ‘gee-wiz’ but with all the other snippets, I am concerned.”

Taking steps to mitigate the situation, the principal met with the superintendent regarding the letter. His response both reassures and concerns the principal.

“Dr. F . . . was very/overly supportive and called in ‘Jen’ [director of human resources] and the assistant super. Now I have a meeting with ‘Bernice’ [assistant superintendent] and ‘Toni’ tomorrow. I hope it goes well, but I’m not certain what that would be.”

What started as a “fighting” response quickly evaporated into a “hiding” response when the primary relational aggressor was brought in to “mediate” the situation.

A month later, another journal entry reflects the principal’s hopes of building a positive community. After having been interviewed by the local newspaper, the principal arranged for the reporter to get input from the students. Even though she had not selected the students to be interviewed, “the students told the reporter that I’m making a difference . . . good to hear.” The principal continues, “She also told me I’m making a [positive] reputation for myself.” Less than a month after the story was printed, the principal jots briefly in her journal over fall break, “I’m concerned about work, but I’m not going to think about that now.” The avoidance stage had begun.

No entries were made at all in the personal journal from that point until mid-November. By then, the principal had shifted into a “running” mode. “I am going to set up a career plan to leave Desert as quickly as possible,

this year if I'm able; other districts and universities are options." One can only speculate on what had caused a regular journal writer to avoid putting personal thoughts to paper during that length of time. By late December, the principal writes,

"I gave Dr. F my verbal resignation today. I can't stand what this place stands for, and what it's willing to do to maintain petty power. As long as I'm principal, I'm responsible for the education students receive, but it is clear that there will be no cooperation in providing even the very basic support necessary to maintain a safe, yet alone, effective school for the students."

The frustration with the situation, which made forms of "fighting" or "hiding" effective coping mechanisms, had clearly given way to complete helplessness and abandonment of the mission.

The next several months include regular personal entries in the journal, and several entries focused on healing from the relational aggression expe-

Table 2
Journal Data

Situation	Reaction
Acclimating to new team	Fight - take team out to lunch; meet 1-1 with each of them
Anonymous letter from staff indicating AP is criticizing principal's leadership	Fight - meet with superintendent; referred to assistant superintendent; met w/ AP
Reflection on progress at job	Hide - hoping to "just make a positive difference"
Community feedback	Fight - students and newspaper reporting positive reputation of new principal
Fall break reflection	Hide - refused to think about work during break
Decision to leave	Run - where to go was secondary to knowing this wasn't what was wanted
Verbal resignation	Run - articulating decision that fighting for this school was fruitless
Healing	Fighting - struggling back to own self-perception; recognition of injuries accrued and anger felt; release of anger through forgiveness
Acceptance	Fighting - finding happiness outside of negative environment and control over perception of other's actions

rienced. Shortly after the “interview” process for replacing her assistant principal, the principal quipped in her journal, “You really can be as happy as you choose to be—even under attack!!” She also writes to remind herself, “Be aware of ‘emotional hijacking;’ recognize it, feel it for what it is, but don’t allow it to take control of your emotions.” It would seem as the helplessness was lifting as a different type of “fighting” emerged.

Table 2 condenses various situations described in the principal’s personal journal, as well as her corresponding reactions to each.

Artifact Data

Also during her interview, the principal made a file of artifacts she had collected during her tenure as documentation. A quick review of these documents corroborated both the principal’s interview and personal journal. Together, the documents create a pattern of lost “fights” by the principal, culminating with avoidance or “hiding” from unavoidable outcomes. Again, documents dated shortly after the pattern of hiding emerged were directly related to the principal’s exit strategy.

There were four sets of artifacts from September, each documenting the assistant superintendent using her position to interfere with, or withhold services or resources needed by the school. The first incident involved the completion of the state school report card, which was assigned to the assistant principal for completion. Team meeting notes indicated that the assistant principal had finished the job, however, an e-mail from the state department of education indicated that the report card had not been filed. When confronted with the discrepancy, the assistant principal e-mailed that she was directed not to complete it by the assistant superintendent, under the impression that it was part of the North Central Accreditation process. The assistant principal’s work on the NCA Annual Report was also nixed by the assistant superintendent. Documentation of both the School Report Card and the Annual Report being completed and submitted by the principal were reviewed.

The remaining three sets of artifacts from September indicate the withholding of services rather than the interference with services. Presentation of documentation justifying the immediate dismissal of a faculty member was made to the director of human resources and the assistant superintendent. Both agreed the individual should be terminated at once, and the assistant superintendent took responsibility for coordinating with the outside agency that co-funded the individual’s position. Despite several reminders in memo form, the assistant superintendent ignored the situation for months until it no longer made sense to discipline the teacher. The assistant superintendent ignored several requests by the principal and faculty committee to discuss the development of a dual enrollment science course. Also ignored, through a hailstorm of requests, were unprocessed purchase orders for lumber and supplies for the woodshop class. More than a third of the class was over before the requests were processed, forcing the principal, the teacher, and the students to create alternative solutions.

The pattern of ignoring legitimate requests from the principal's school by the assistant superintendent continued through October. Matters pertaining to personnel, transportation, testing, construction, and program of study were directly controlled by the assistant superintendent. Documentation indicating human resources agreement to replace a "burned out" teacher resulted in a string of unanswered e-mails and memos to both the human resource director and the assistant superintendent. High school principals were called to the district office and informed that students must carry a bus pass in order to ride the bus, and that activity bus runs would be cut by half. While the principal of the more affluent high school agreed readily, the principal of the lower-income school objected to the hardship it would place on poor working families, who would have to pick up the slack in transportation. An e-mail to the assistant superintendent from the transportation director stated the other "principal indicated the proposed change would not be a problem, but that Desert High School was not supportive of the initiative." The initiative was adopted.

Documents were examined that corroborated the principal's story of being promised a quick turn around on replacing the transferred assistant principal, yet the process was not approved until mid-November. At that time, the committee's recommendation was ignored until January, when it was announced that a new round of interviews would be held by the assistant superintendent. The principal's story of having the state testing protocol jeopardized by the assistant principal leaving campus is also corroborated with documents. The e-mail from the assistant superintendent justifying the behavior was punitive toward the principal, but excusive toward the assistant principal.

The final, and perhaps most detrimental, artifacts for October document the unsupported decision to change the program of study for the school to be undeniably vocationally directed. Notes from the weekly construction meetings between the principal and the construction crew indicate that the assistant superintendent had caused the "footprint" of the new building to be changed after the foundation had been poured. The principal's shock at this change is evident in her margin notes. An e-mail to the assistant superintendent was sent just after that meeting, requesting information about the changes to the plan. Both ensuing e-mails and board meeting minutes indicated that the high school principals and assistant superintendent had decided on "specialty" programs to distinguish each of the high schools. Desert High was assigned auto- and woodshop, JROTC, and daycare. The principal's objections are not noted in those minutes.

January's artifacts reveal the hiring process of the new assistant principal. The memorandum of understanding with the teachers' association clearly outlines the procedure. This procedure was followed in the original round of interviews. The second round of interviews clearly violated the Memo Of Understanding document. After interviewing only two candidates, all deliberation documents were collected after the assistant superintendent raised her voice and lurched across the table at the principal for not

Table 3
Artifact Data

Situation	Reaction
AP refusing to complete required tasks due to assistant superintendent telling her not to	Fight - completed tasks herself
Assistant superintendent avoids carrying out staff discipline as promised (JROTC)	Fight - lost; situation put off until it no longer made sense to discipline
Assistant superintendent ignores program requests (supplies, staffing)	Fight - lost; existing and potential programs suffer; no action on staffing needs
AP refuses to cover assigned (and agreed to) duty of supervising state testing	Fight - lost; requested discipline for AP resulted in sharp defense for AP
District bussing procedure change disadvantages lower SES students	Fight - lost; principal labeled as "non-supportive" and bussing restricted
"Quick" replacement of transferred AP drawn out for months	Fight - lost; multiple requests ignored or put off; campus administration shared burden
2 anonymous qualitative and quantitative staff surveys ignored by district personnel	Fight - although dismissed by district, 75% support reported to staff
Legitimate AP interview process ignored by assistant superintendent and HR director	Fight - lost; after final approval of process, recommendation by committee ignored
Vocational track "signature" programs assigned to principal's school	Fight - lost; principal's arguments on equity of opportunity ignored; decision held
Program of study and construction of new building changed by assistant superintendent w/out notifying principal	Hide - obvious "end run" of principal resulted in chagrin and sense of shame
Principal directed to cease work toward NCA accreditation	Hide - without support of district, task was moot; too tired to fight anymore
"Illegal" AP interview process forced on principal	Fight - lost; principal's input in discussion on candidates was ignored and principal was physically threatened
Resignation	Run - frustration of not having the authority necessary to run the campus led to quitting
Special Board Meeting	Run - request to be relieved of duties prior to end of contract approved by board

agreeing with her assessment of the candidate. This is based on review of the principal's notes from the meeting, as all other documents were confiscated prior to the non unanimous decision being announced to the campus.

The final artifacts presented for review are the principal's resignation letter, a letter of recommendation by the superintendent, and a legal agreement between the principal and the school board. The letter of resignation is brief and upholds the verbal resignation given in December. The superintendent's letter of recommendation is factual, and paints the principal's performance in a positive light. The "modification of employment contract and mutual release" was drafted by the district's attorney under the negotiation of the principal. The principal received a handsome settlement on the contract for the promise not to litigate.

Table 3 condenses various situations documented in the principal's artifact file, as well as her corresponding reactions to each.

Discussion

Upon reviewing the data contained in Tables 1–3, the patterns of the subject's reactions to various situations were classified into "fight," "hide," and "run." Typologies to represent the attributes of the subject's reactions were selected, and approved by the subject for accuracy. A "tiger" was chosen to represent fighting reactions; an "ostrich" was selected to represent "hiding" reactions; a "cheetah" was designated for "running" responses.

The spirit of the tiger coalesces the subject's engagement of relational aggressors. The subject chose to interact and struggle against the situation on multiple occasions, striving to change the predetermined outcome. Legal or instructional program issues, where evidence was ignored or suppressed, resulted in 12 instances of fighting back. A proactive struggle to establish relationships within the community was documented four times during this study. Social out casting and personal onslaughts provoked three cases of standing up to the aggressor. Twice, a different form of "fighting" is documented, reflecting an inward struggle for self-valuation and healing. This inward struggle is closely cross-classified with a "running" reaction at an observational level, yet when measured against the emotional essence of each typology, it clearly identifies with the strife and struggle associated with the tiger. The tiger is a strong fighter; capable of protecting itself, yet it does not kill for sport. The tiger reactions exhibited by the subject served to support her efficacy. Her inward struggles toward this end provide a "negative" case example to limit the meaning of this "fighting" pattern.

The stereotypical (and misrepresentative) figure of the ostrich burying its head in the sand to avoid danger was selected as the typology for the subject's "hiding" responses to relational aggression. A comical image is produced as one wonders why such a powerful, fast animal would select the self-defeating escape tactic of hiding its eyes from approaching danger. The subject, like this massively strong bird, chose to avoid several in-

stances of aggression, withdrawing from any engagement with the aggressor or the situation in a vain attempt to make the danger “disappear.” Early in the study, the subject ignored obtuse instances of social out casting, including personal slights, assuming relationships would warm as others “got to know” her. After several setbacks due to relational aggression, the subject further disengaged from the situation by refusing to reflect on her own efficacy to make a positive difference to the school. No less than three deliberate uses of positional power to further relational aggression against the subject also resulted in withdrawal from the situation. Earlier instances of “ostrich” reactions may have stemmed from personal convictions of social behavior; however, when applied to instances of positional power abuse the reaction appears just as defeating as the giant bird with its head in the sand. By avoidance of her own reflection on her situation, the subject demonstrated her greatest symptom of career burnout.

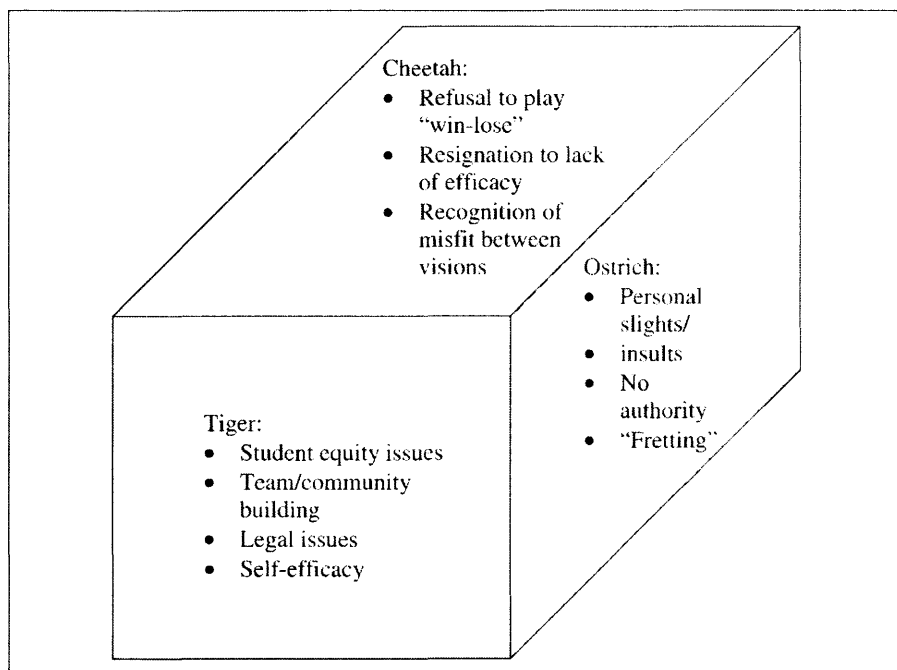
The cheetah, known as the fastest land animal, was selected to represent the classification of behaviors exhibited by the subject that were designed to remove her from her situation. In reviewing the data collected in this study, five “running” reactions were tallied, each involving her decision to resign her position. Just as a cheetah will use its incredible gift to escape harm, it also uses it to sustain itself through hunting. All instances of “running” should not be considered defeat or weakness; sustenance is found in nourishing environments. Like the cheetah, which can run or fight, the subject chose to run, as much away from the dangers of the relational aggression as toward a stable, nurturing environment. Again, the instances of struggling through her healing journey, seeking to reestablish her self value, represent a near cross-over between “cheetah” and “tiger” reactions. The characteristics of these typologies are similar, which may help to understand the subtleties of each reaction; yet the dominant characteristic of the cheetah is to run, not fight. For this reason, the subject’s struggle for healing the relational aggression wounds are classified with the tiger typology.

Figure 1 is a matrix, comparing the analyst-constructed typologies for the principal’s reactions to the various situations she encountered.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

A clear pattern of “aggressor” and “victim” emerge through analyzing the data, however, the term “victim” may be subjective to perception. This study finds that the artifacts reveal a pattern of lost “fights” on the part of the “victim” as the “aggressor” controlled the outcome of each situation. This supports Boyartzis and McKee (2005) in that a leader who regularly abuses power for personal gain, or ineffectively managing others, causes those around them to suffer from their dissonant leadership style. study finds that, although clearly playing the victim role, the principal continued to struggle for the ability to make a difference to her school. It can be determined from this finding that the stressors most affecting the principal were

Figure 1
Three-way comparison of motivations behind each reaction typology.



interpersonal stressors, rather than workload stressors, which supports the findings of Sakai, et al. (2005). From these findings, it is possible to conclude that long term exposure to a relationally aggressive climate, poor leadership, and chronic obstruction of efficacy pushed the subject toward near burnout.

In describing her thoughts and feelings about the relational aggression as it unfolded, this principal provided descriptions that categorized three basic responses to the aggression. The findings of this study define the act of “fighting” against relational aggression as attempts to establish a positive impact, uphold logic, or find a “win-win” solution in the face of relational attacks. “I was more shocked at earlier attacks; I’d counter with facts, data, attempts to mediate,” or in other words, she would “fight” in a defensive way.

Regarding acute relational aggression, the principal stated, It was obvious to anyone that someone wasn’t playing by the rules. That’s the ironic thing about attacks; if you stay professional, the aggressor usually ‘wins.’ It’s all psychological warfare, and unless you unleash a weapon of your own, they think they’re ‘winning.’ Meanwhile, you feel more and more out of place.

By holding to a personal code of honor throughout these encounters, the principal may be seen as “hiding” from the aggressor. Further findings de-

fine “hiding” as the attempt to avoid conflict, both internal and external. This supports Cortina and Magley (2003) in that by raising her voice in protest, the principal triggered further mistreatment by the aggressors, yet in remaining silent, she began to suffer significant symptoms of burnout. These findings make it possible to conclude that being denied the opportunity to fulfill one’s primary duty may result in choosing to “avoid” a relational aggression situation. This conclusion supports Swick (1989) in stating that “lack of personal efficacy” is the single largest cause of workplace stress.

Analysis of the principal’s motivation and behavior indicate that she placed more emphasis on *doing* her job than on *keeping* it. This study finds that by deciding not to play a “win-lose” game, the principal chose to “run” from the situation encompassing the relational aggression. This leads to the finding that the principal chose her coping strategy based on personality temperament, rather than on workplace job stressors, supporting the conclusion of Mayes, Johnson, and Sandi. (2000). Therefore, it may be possible to conclude from these findings that holding a high sense of purpose in one’s work may produce the drive to prevent career burnout; “running” may be an effective coping strategy under certain circumstances. This conclusion supports Yee (1990) in finding that those who seek existential goals through their work are more likely to leave jobs with inadequate administrative and collegial support in their search for efficacy.

This study also finds that after the decision to “run” was made, a different pattern of “fighting” emerged. Once the decision to leave was made, the “fight” took on a different form. Rather than “fighting” to correct a situation, the principal fought to renew her values and identity, including reflection, humor, and “standing up to” the aggressors. The study finds that within this realm, the term “fight” is even more defensive. The major difference between these two types of “fighting” appears to be the motivation behind them. The first round of fighting focused on finding a balance with the outer world. After deciding not to play the “win-lose” game, the fight focuses inward to help make sense of, and heal from the aggression. This finding supports the conclusion that acceptance of the fact that one is in a losing situation is more liberating than fighting against all hope. This conclusion is supported by Pines and Aronson (1988), who found that the most stressful aspects of a job are those which prevent the individual from achieving significant and meaningful work.

Recommendations

As a result of this study, insight into the dark side of female relationships has been gained.

Recommendations for Practice

In an effort to reduce the destructive stress relational aggression has on all those involved, the following recommendations for practice are made:

1. Educating leaders, women and men alike, on the roles some women take in relational aggression.
2. Developing programs to prepare leaders to identify, prevent, or stop all relational aggression, from petty to acute instances.
3. Developing effective self-assessments to help those trapped in all three relational aggression roles identify their behavior patterns and guide them to more healthy, productive interactions.
4. Creating and sustaining viable support groups for women, particularly women in leadership roles, who become victimized through relational aggression.

Recommendations for Further Study

Future research should explore the findings of this study to advance the understanding of the roles played by females in unofficial organizational hierarchies. Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following specific recommendations are made for future study:

1. Developing a study utilizing a sample of women in leadership, to increase transferability of study.
2. Replicating the above study using a sample of any level of working women.
3. Replicating the above study using a sample of any women, working or not.
4. Developing a study that measures relational aggression in male interactions compared to that among female interactions.

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